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SUBJECT: SECOND THOUGHTS ON KARZAI AMONG AFGHAN ELITE

REF: A. 08 KABUL 1812

[B](#). 08 KABUL 3111

[C](#). 08 KABUL 2963

Classified By: DCM Christopher Dell for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY. Constituencies important to President Karzai's re-election hopes are voicing dissatisfaction that Karzai is ignoring their counsel and failing to improve local governance and fight corruption. Disappointment with Karzai's performance over the last few years is becoming more common with the Kabul elite and other voting blocs that supported him in 2004. Some groups feel Karzai is focusing his re-election campaign on outreach to southern Pashtun tribes and reconciliation with insurgent groups, disregarding the diverse coalition behind his commanding victory five years ago. Karzai remains the only major declared candidate and therefore the favorite to win, but his inattention to some once-likely supporters means that low voter turnout in Pashtun areas could open the door for a strong challenger to rally anti-government sentiment.

Karzai Moves Away From Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan

[2](#). (C) Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) Chairman Arghandewal said his party is less likely to endorse Karzai amid signs of the president's outreach to insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. HIA's leadership staked its entrance into Afghan politics on distancing itself from Hekmatyar's insurgent Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) faction. But now amid worries that Karzai views Hekmatyar's endorsement as more crucial to winning Pashtun votes than HIA's, Arghandewal vowed the party will throw its support behind another candidate. Even with a Hekmatyar endorsement of Karzai, Arghandewal claimed HIA could move 1.5 million votes to another candidate.

[3](#). (C) Arghandewal said Karzai has cut off almost all contact with his party. The president has not met face-to-face with the HIA leadership in the six months since the party's conference (ref A) and no longer channels funds to the party. Moreover, Karzai and his top advisor Farooq Wardak are still trying to stick HIA with the bill for use of the Loya Jirga grounds for its conference -- costs Karzai allegedly promised to cover. Karzai's actions have alienated HIA members in Kabul and the north who are less likely than HIA's eastern members to hold Hekmatyar in high regard. Without HIA support in ethnically mixed northern provinces, Karzai may be hard pressed to repeat his strong 2004 performance in Balkh, Kunduz, and other northern provinces.

[4](#). (C) Arghandewal said HIA will look for the candidate most capable of improving local governance. Karzai and his appointees have failed to produce benefits for the people after seven years in power, Arghandewal said. "Elections and democracy are the work of the international community, and

the Afghan government hasn't accomplished anything on its own." Other HIA leaders say they want a president able to fix roads and improve government services. Karzai's governance failures have also cemented Arghandawal's support for popularly elected governors and mayors -- a position shared by the United Front opposition.

Kabul Elites Look Elsewhere

15. (C) Karzai has become increasingly unpopular among Kabul's political and business elites. Most insist the president has lost their vote, though few have committed to an alternative. Corruption and frustrations over electricity and water shortages top the list of complaints. Many one-time supporters also say Karzai has been more distant in the last year, refusing to take calls or meetings with allies he once met with weekly. Among Kabul's powerful political families, insults to egos can mean just as much as electricity.

16. (C) Karzai has lost support from two wings of the influential Gailani family. One wing, led by Pir Sayed Ahmad Gailani and his son Hamed, the Upper House Deputy Speaker, are actively courting other political camps to challenge Karzai. Lower House MP Ishaq Gailani (Paktika, Pashtun), son of Pir Gailani's older brother, also refuses to endorse Karzai's re-election, creating at least one point on which the divided family can agree. Ishaq Gailani said Karzai has failed to build national unity, opening the door for northerners to unite against Pashtuns. Both Gailani camps also expressed disappointment that Karzai has excluded them

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from his Taliban reconciliation initiatives.

Few Karzai Fans Left in Parliament

17. (C) Lower House MP Shukria Barakzai (Kabul, Pashtun) leads the Third Line parliamentary faction of more than a dozen reformist MPs who generally supported Karzai earlier in his term. Barakzai said Karzai has become hopelessly tied up in reconciliation efforts that are both unlikely to succeed and lack the support of most Afghans. She is unsure who the Third Line will support instead, but promised her faction would work for the president's electoral defeat.

18. (C) Upper House MP Rida Azimi (Parwan, Tajik), once one of Karzai's main supporters in Parliament, now says she opposes his re-election. The overwhelming opinion of her constituents has tilted against Karzai as his administration fails to make good on promises to restore electricity to Kabul and remove corrupt officials. She also fears his advisors are leading him in the wrong direction on reconciliation with the Taliban and other insurgent groups. She expects her eventual endorsement of another candidate to cost her a presidential re-appointment to the Upper House and is already planning for a Lower House campaign in 2010.

19. (C) Other parliamentarians express similar dissatisfaction with Karzai. They say the president has nearly cut off his engagement with Parliament, both politically and personally. MPs complain Karzai has directed his Cabinet to avoid appearing before Parliament and only occasionally invites MPs to the Palace. On most occasions, he engages with MPs in their individual capacities as former warlords or traditional powerbrokers and not as parliamentary leaders or committee chairman. Lower House Deputy Speaker Mirwais Yaseni (Nangarhar, Pashtun) said he will probably continue to help manage the Palace's legislative agenda when asked, but doubted he'll play a role in Karzai's re-election campaign. Yaseni's ambivalence is typical of Karzai's roughly 40 one-time loyalists and 60 occasional supporters in the Lower House. The failure of even one Lower House MP to publicly support the government's efforts to move the

election date to the fall shows the president's loss of clout in the chamber.

Disenfranchised Supporters Criticize the 'Advisor Bubble'

¶10. (C) Former Karzai supporters blame the president's supposed loss of contact with his constituencies on advisors Farooq Wardak (currently Education Minister, but has worn several hats in the Karzai government) and Chief of Staff Mohammad Daudzai. Palace Chief of Policy Sebghatullah Sanjar said Daudzai has reduced Karzai's one-on-one meetings with other advisors and supporters over the last year, resulting in filtered access to once loyal supporters and a skewed view of public sentiment. Sanjar said Karzai realizes the close hold his advisors have on him, but is reluctant to change the status quo. "He is a lonely and alone man and does not know who he can trust," Sanjar told PolOff.

No Consensus on Alternatives

¶11. (C) Although united in their opposition to a second Karzai term, the president's recent critics seem unlikely to settle on a consensus alternative candidate. Shukria Barakzai shares a tribal connection with Nangarhar Gov. Gul Aqa Sherzai, the current flavor of the month in some circles, and seems interested in his possible candidacy. But HIA, the Gailanis, and the rest of the Kabul elite say they don't think Sherzai is a good fit for national office. Expat possibilities Ali Ahmad Jalali and Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai struggle to ignite enthusiasm for their campaigns, as do minor candidates from within Parliament's ranks and the margins of the Afghan political scene (ref B).

Karzai's Re-Election Strategy Takes a Narrower Focus

¶12. (C) Karzai will need to ensure heavy Pashtun turnout in populous provinces like Helmand, Kandahar and Nangarhar, where he won more than 90 percent of the votes in 2004, in order to offset his declining popularity elsewhere. Karzai apparently intends to focus on energizing his core supporters rather than the broad coalition of Afghans who propelled him to a convincing 55 percent first-round win in 2004. His decision to pursue reconciliation, popular with his tribal Pashtun base but disliked throughout much of the rest of the

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country (ref C), appears to be motivated by such calculations. Similarly, the president's increasingly vocal attacks on the US and the Coalition, while largely motivated by deeply felt and personal concern with civilian casualties, also happen to appeal to deep-seated xenophobia in Afghanistan and force attention away from Karzai's own shortcomings. By pursuing this course, Karzai may strengthen his base sufficiently to win but at the price of alienating those politically engaged and powerful constituencies he needs to govern effectively. While the election still appears to be Karzai's to lose, low voter turnout or the emergence of a serious challenger could rob him of the decisive victory he is seeking, and could also further complicate our relations and presence here.

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